

Senate Bill 402

March 15, 2011

Presented by Dave Risley

Senate Fish and Game Committee

Mr. Chairman and committee members, I am Dave Risley, Wildlife Division Administrator of Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP). I am here in opposition to Senate Bill 402.

FWP does not oppose hunting of wolves. In fact, FWP has worked extremely hard to gain state management authority for wolves. Once we get them off the federal endangered species list, it is FWP's intention to roll wolves into traditional wildlife management similar to mountain lions and bears, and use ethical, fair-chase hunting as the primary management tool. Like other game animals, the hunting season recommendation will take into consideration population status of wolves and their prey, management objectives, wolf biology, social concerns and fair-chase hunting objectives.

Our concern with SB402 is that it mandates a Spring hunt without considering any of these variables. For example, the population could reach a point where we don't have a Fall hunt because of a low population. We probably wouldn't want a Spring hunt for the same reason, but this bill would mandate one.

We typically don't hunt game animals after mid-February due to sensitivities about the advanced state of pregnancy. Wolves typically breed in the mid to late February and have pups in late-April-May. So a Spring hunt would directly overlap with breeding and birthing. While this is obviously a way to limit reproduction, FWP is concerned it will result in a significant backlash against hunters and hunting due to concerns about disrupting pack structure at a critical time, killing pregnant females, or killing lactating females and orphaning pups.

Additionally, one of the tenants of wildlife management is that animals that are hunted should be used. Most game animals are hunted for meat or hide, or both. Since most people won't eat a wolf, their primary hunting value is their pelt. Wolf pelts are most prime in Fall, and would be in the worst shape in the Spring. Again, FWP is concerned that this will add to the backlash against hunting and hunters.

We assume the impetus for this bill is the proposed Congressional language that would direct the Secretary of Interior to reinstate the April 2009 rule delisting the Northern Rocky Mountain wolf population. However, that language gives the Secretary 60 days to do so, and then another 30 days before the rule becomes effective. Therefore, even if that language passed Congress today, it could be mid-June before FWP could have a Spring hunt, meaning only one week of Spring would remain.

FWP and the FWP Commission are committed to promulgating a wolf hunt once they are delisted. The FWP Commission was reviewing a hunt proposal for Fall 2010 that would have resulted in a quota of 186 wolves. The structure of that hunt would have initiated hunting as early as September 15 in some areas, just three months later than this bill is requiring. That structure will likely be proposed again if delisting occurs.

For the above reasons, FWP thinks this bill is unnecessary, and may result in an unnecessary backlash against hunters and wolf hunting. FWP is committed to having a managed wolf hunt once wolves are delisted, and respectfully requests you table SB402 and let the existing wildlife management and Commission processes work.